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ELEMENTS OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE ATONEMENT IN THE FACTS OF OUR LORD'S SUFFERINGS.

By PROFESSOR JAS. S. CANDLISH, D.D.,
Free Church College, Glasgow, Scotland.

ONE of the most prominent characteristics of the religious thought of the present day is the impatience of mere abstract theories or dogmas, and the demand that what are to be received as truths in theology be shown to be founded on actual, verifiable facts, and to be the legitimate interpretation, or necessary presupposition, of such facts. In former times a doctrine might be accepted if it were only shown to be taught by ecclesiastical tradition or in Holy Scripture, even though it were of an entirely transcendental nature, unconnected with human history and experience; but the modern mind looks upon all such propositions as of little use, if not open to suspicion, and craves to be shown that theological doctrines are expressive of realities; so the doctrine of original sin is acceptable, when shown to be a case of the verified law of heredity; the necessity of the new birth seems reasonable in the light of biogenesis, and so on. On the whole, this tendency is healthful and good; it is expressive of the desire for reality and the determination not to be satisfied with empty forms and phrases. Yet it has its dangers, and may be pushed too far. For we are not entitled to assume that we are able to understand the reality that underlies all that God has made known to us, or that there may not be truths in his Word which it concerns us to know and believe, but which we cannot fully verify in facts. That even the most transcendent doctrines of revelation are the expression of realities, and not of mere notions, we may well believe, but possibly the realities may be beyond our ken; and we may have to accept the statements of the inspired apostles and prophets, though we

cannot show them to be verified by the facts within our knowledge. There is a tendency to reject or to ignore such statements which is practically to refuse to be disciples of the apostles; and in regard especially to the meaning and purpose of the death of our Lord inadequate views have been adopted by many because, in the laudable desire to make this great doctrine a reality, they have not taken into account any declarations of Scripture which they could not see to be implied in the historical facts. I think this is a mistake, but at the same time I admit that we ought to be more cautious in the use we make, in systematizing, of those inspired statements which we cannot verify by facts; and therefore I propose to consider how far we can go in verifying the doctrine of the atonement by means of the facts of our Lord's life and death. I assume the substantial truth of the gospel narratives, and look at them as giving the history of the events; and as to the doctrine, I am content to take it as expressed in the Westminster Catechism: "Christ executes the office of a priest in his once offering himself a sacrifice to satisfy divine justice and reconcile us to God, and in his making continual intercession for us." The former clause is that which concerns us here, and we ask: How much of this doctrine can be gathered from the history?

I. One essential element of the doctrine is, that Christ gave up his life by a perfectly free act of his own will. This is proved by the emphatic way in which he is recorded to have said, "The Son of Man came . . . to give his life,"¹ "I lay down my life . . . of myself . . . I have power to lay it down,"² and by the apostles' saying, "He gave himself," "He offered himself," etc., his death is presented to us, not as a mere suffering which he patiently endured, and by which his work was brought to an end, but as an action which is part of his work, and indeed the crown and consummation of it. The passages just referred to are not to be limited to his suffering and death, but include his whole work and life on earth, though they have doubtless a special reference to his cross.

¹ Matt. 20 : 28 ; Mark 10 : 45.

² John 10 : 15, 17, 18.

Now that the death of Jesus had this peculiar character is shown by historical facts. Viewed as an event in history the causes that brought it about were the opposition of the Jewish priesthood to his teaching and claims, acting on the prejudices and passions of the people. Jesus would not withdraw his declaration that he is the Messiah, the Son of God, and he died as a martyr to that testimony. But when we consider the circumstances preceding his trial and death we shall see that he might have escaped without being false to his testimony. His life had often been in danger before on similar accounts, but he had always previously avoided the danger. Sometimes the impression of his words, or the favor of the common people, had prevented his enemies from laying hands on him; sometimes he had withdrawn and hid himself. This was according to the principle he laid down for his disciples, not to court persecution, but "when they persecute you in one city flee to another." Thus, even after Judas had resolved to betray him, Jesus took careful means to secure that the traitor should not know where he meant to keep the pass-over, and so not be able to interrupt the last supper.¹ But from that time on it was different. Instead of retiring to some spot where he would be hidden, he went to the garden that Judas knew well, and when the traitor came with the band to take him he at once gave himself up.² In the narration of this there are indications of the supernatural aid and power he might have used for his escape,³ but even without the consideration of these the historical circumstances show that Jesus could have avoided being taken, but that by his own free act he gave himself up to be condemned and suffer death. His whole purpose, in steadfastly setting his face to go up to Jerusalem at that feast, shows the same thing. He had avoided Judea before, even at feast times, and he seems to have been safe in Galilee, and certainly he would have been safe in neighboring Gentile lands. He was not, therefore, exactly in the position of a martyr who cannot possibly escape death except by being unfaithful to truth; he

¹ See especially Luke 22 : 7-16.

³ Matt. 26 : 53 ; John 18 : 6.

² John 18 : 2-11.

might have saved his life without any such denial; but he so acted as to give himself up to death. This it was that caused such dismay to his disciples that they all forsook him and fled. They were ready to fight for him had he permitted them, but his unresisting surrender to his enemies seems to have taken them by surprise. They had failed to understand or take in the many hints, or even plain statements, in which he had foretold his condemnation and death, and spoken of his own act in giving his life, and therefore they were utterly perplexed and shaken in faith.

II. A second element in the doctrine, that appears from properly historical evidence, is that Jesus gave up his life out of regard to God his Father, and obedience to his will. He did not give way to circumstances, or yield to the opposition and power of his enemies, nor yet did he submit to any mere abstract considerations of duty, but directly to the personal will of God. As this statement has reference to the views and purposes of Jesus, it can be proved only by his own recorded sayings, and not by any mere external events; but his expressions on the subject presented in the gospels are numerous, and clear enough to prove this, as truly as the intention of any person in history can be proved by his utterances. It was to his Father's will, giving him the cup to drink from which he so shrank, that he gave up his own will.¹ He spoke of the commandment which he had received from his Father,² of his going to his death because he loved his Father and did as he gave him commandment.³ He indicates that this will of God was made known to him through the Scriptures, for when he declared that he could pray to the Father and he would give him twelve legions of angels he added, "but how then should the Scriptures be fulfilled that thus it should be?"⁴ He recognized God's authority in the power by which he was put to death, for when Pilate said, "Knowest thou not that I have power to crucify thee and have power to release thee?" he replied, "Thou couldst have no power at all against me except it were given thee from above."⁵ By this he meant not

¹ Matt. 26:42; Mark 14:36; Luke 22:42.

³ John 14:31.

² John 10:18.

⁴ Matt. 26:54.

⁵ John 19:10, 11.

merely the general providence of God, but that as a magistrate Pilate's authority was given by God, and Caiaphas had the greater guilt in using the divine institution of magistracy for his wicked purpose.

The numerous and various utterances, all of them consistent, make out, as a matter of historical fact, that it was out of regard to the will of God, conveyed to him through his Word, that Jesus, by a free and spontaneous act, gave himself up to suffer and to die at the hands of the authority that bore the sword for God. He not only gave himself, but gave himself to God, in an act of religious obedience and submission. He offered himself to God; and by reason of this his voluntary act of yielding himself to death has the character of a sacrifice, in the wide and general sense of that term, *corban*, a gift or act of homage, brought near to God in religious worship. In this respect his death is of a piece with his whole life, and is simply the consummation and crown of it. For it is an historical fact that the whole career of Jesus was ruled by the principle of self-denying obedience to the will of God, and was the doing a work which he recognized that his Father had given him to do. That work consisted, indeed, in the deliverance of men from sin and suffering; but it was felt and shown by Jesus to be no less truly for God than for men. It was a work on which God's heart was set, the fulfilment of which not only manifested his glory, but caused him joy in the presence of the angels; and Jesus ever acted as fully conscious of this aspect of his work; he was jealous for the holiness of God's house, the purity of his worship, the authority of his law, the manifestation of his love; his whole life was a service of God. This feature distinguishes his work from that of Confucius, Buddha, and Zoroaster, who labored, according to their light, for the teaching and elevation of their fellows; as on the other hand his living for the salvation of man distinguishes Jesus from Mahomet, who had a zeal for God but little love to man.

Now if his freely giving himself up to death was an integral part of his work, it also is shown as an historical fact to have a bearing towards God and to be an act of service rendered to him.

Herein lies a great part of the value of Jesus' death. Its value lay in its moral character, not in the mere metaphysical greatness of his person, or in the intensity of his sufferings, but in the meekness, the patience, the love and forgiveness, in which it was undergone; and preëminent among the moral qualities that make the cross of Christ precious are the love to God, resignation to his will, devotion to his work, and faith in his Word in which our Saviour endured the cross. Because in perfect and infinite love he gave himself for us to God, his is an offering and a sacrifice of a sweet-smelling savor.

III. But it further appears from the facts of history that Jesus endured a mysterious suffering at the hand of God, which he felt to be the bitterest element in what he had to suffer. No otherwise can we account for the agony in the garden, the soul trouble in the temple,¹ and the cry of desertion on the cross, without making Jesus to have shown less fortitude and courage than many of the martyrs, not only among his own followers, but others also. But it is equally evident from the history that this cannot be the explanation; it must have been that he suffered more intensely in spirit, or felt more keenly the bitterness of what came upon him than any other ever did. His was a soul keenly sensitive to moral pain, and the ingratitude of his people, the treachery of his betrayer, the cowardice of his disciples, the hypocrisy of his accusers, the profane ribaldry of his mockers, wounded him more deeply than any bodily agony. But besides it is the fact that he felt the hand of God upon him. It was to his Father that he prayed that the cup might pass from him, and he calls it the cup which my Father has given me;² he quotes the prophecy of Zechariah, "I will smite the shepherd,"³ etc., and he cries, "My God, why hast thou forsaken me?"⁴ I do not think that we are warranted in inferring from these several sayings any special infliction of suffering distinct from and additional to what we know he endured; but they do certainly show that he recognized God's hand in them, not merely permitting them, but having positively appointed them.

¹ John 12:27.

³ Matt. 26:31.

² John 18:11.

⁴ Matt. 27:46; Mark 15:34.

Jesus, too, did not rejoice in these tribulations, as his apostles did and exhorted their brethren to do. They recognized that tribulation worked in them patience and assurance of their Christian character and helped to make them partakers of God's holiness; but Jesus never acknowledged any sin that would have to be purged away by suffering; he declared indeed that he was to pass by suffering into his glory, but it was the glory of not abiding alone but bearing much fruit, and drawing all men to him out of the service and dominion of the prince of this world.

To the question, Why did he suffer? the answer must undoubtedly be, not because of any sin of his own, but for the salvation of men. Since his suffering was felt by him as coming from the hand of God, there must have been something on the part of God that stood in the way of man's salvation and could not otherwise be removed. Were it merely to show us an example of perfect holiness tried to the uttermost, of meekness and patience under the extremest suffering and wrong, or to win us from the love of sin by exposing it in all its loathsomeness, and by revealing the love of God suffering to the death from the sin of the world; this mysterious, yet truly real, element of divine appointment and infliction of the suffering would be unmeaning and out of place. To all merely subjective theories of atonement this element must prove a stumbling block that cannot be got over, and yet, according to all the narratives, it is an historical fact.

It appears also from the history that Jesus felt very specially the shame of being treated as a criminal, and looked upon this as not a mere accident in his sufferings, but as a divine appointment. His condemnation was unjust, but it was by the authorities invested by God with the right to punish wrong with death; and it was ordained that the Servant of Jehovah should suffer so. At the last supper Jesus said: "This that is written must be fulfilled in me, And he was numbered with the transgressors."¹ When he was taken he said: "Are ye come out as against a robber?" "But this is your hour and the power of darkness,"² as if to intimate that the power to employ such legal force was

¹ Luke 22 : 37; Matt. 26 : 56.

² Matt. 26 : 55; Mark 14 : 48; Luke 22 : 52, 53.

granted them at that critical hour. More especially in his words to the women of Jerusalem who came to lament for him (Luke 23:28-31) he puts his own suffering on a level with those that were to come as a judgment from God on the guilty people, and exclaims: "If they do these things in the green tree, what shall be done in the dry?" These words contain an allusion to Ezek. 20:47, where the divine judgment on Jerusalem is described as a fire consuming every green tree "and every dry tree;" and in the explanation that follows (21:3), that is said to be "the sword cutting off the righteous and the wicked." Jesus is the righteous, the green tree; but he is suffering, at the hand of God, the judgment against the wicked.

Jesus, as we saw before, freely gave up his life to God, and now we perceive also that it was to God as the righteous judge of all the earth, whose truth is revealed against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men. He the righteous one suffered what men had deserved as sinners, and what made the suffering especially bitter to him was, that it was the expression of God's holy displeasure and righteous judgment against the sin of the race, with which he, by becoming man, had made himself one.

Does not this bear out historically the view that Paul gives when he makes the essence of Christ's redeeming us from the curse of the law to be his becoming a curse for us by hanging on a tree, and again says "God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us"? It does not, I think, warrant the phrase used in the Westminster Catechisms, though not in the Confession, "the wrath of God," unless that is taken as simply equivalent to, and explained by, "the cursed death of the cross." But in Scripture the wrath of God seems always to denote his actual feeling of holy indignation against real personal sin and ill-deserving, and not merely the infliction of punishment, as the phrase was understood by many to mean. In the latter sense we can see how it might be used of Christ's suffering, since undoubtedly he has, according to the will and appointment of God, pain and sorrow in consequence of the sin of men. But if the wrath of God means, as I think it does, not merely the infliction of suffering, but the personal displeasure of the Holy One at moral evil, we

cannot conceive of Jesus the sinless one being the object of that. Nowhere, either, is it directly said in Scripture that he bore the wrath of God, and in this most mysterious and sacred subject it is wisest and most reverent to keep as closely as possible to the words, as well as to the substance, of what is revealed. We must indeed not merely repeat Bible expressions by rote, but seek to apprehend their meaning, and neither extenuate nor exaggerate it; but we do well to abstain here from inferential reasoning, even such as may be legitimate enough on other subjects.

In regard to the cry "Why hast thou forsaken me?" I think it must be taken as expressing a truth, and not merely a feeling wrung from our Saviour by agony, but having no reality corresponding to it. That Jesus, even for a moment in the darkest hour, had a false and unworthy idea of his Father, and gave open utterance to it, seems to me inconsistent with his whole character and life and with his other utterances from the cross. The desertion of which he speaks must be something not merely fancied, but intensely real. Nor can it be explained as simply his abandonment to the power of his enemies. If that were so, we should expect the cry to be uttered before, not during, the darkness that came over all the land. It was before that, when Jesus was hanging on the cross, as an outcast from earth, reviled and mocked by the priests, the people, the soldiers, and even the crucified malefactor, and when heaven gave no sign of sympathy with him or of displeasure at his persecutors, it was then that naturally the sufferer would feel most as if forsaken by God. The mysterious darkness, shrouding his sufferings from view, and striking the bystanders with surprise and awe, would rather seem an interposition of God on his behalf; nature would appear to be sympathizing with the Crucified, or expressing horror at the deed. Yet it was out of that darkness that the mournful cry came. God was hiding his face from him; and the question "Why?" was a protest that there was nothing in him to deserve or account for such dealing. Doubtless it was immediately answered by the assurance that his blood was shed for many for the remission of sins. We cannot explain or conceive how the holy and loving God can hide his face

from his holy and righteous servant; nor can we ever understand what soul-suffering that involved to the perfectly holy Son of God. Only we may believe that as he had become one of us, and felt the shame and curse of our sins come on him, he would not come to his God except as the head of a sinful race, responsible for all its sins; He who is of purer eyes than to behold evil, and cannot look on iniquity, could not look on him in whom he saw the sin of the world until, the sacrifice having been finished, he could look with double good pleasure on him, and on us in him.

This is no doubt an explanation of our Lord's words that goes beyond the actual historical fact, and is only hypothetical; but the fact itself proves that there was something mysterious about his experiences on the cross, a suffering that must remain unknown and inconceivable to us, and that cannot be accounted for on any theory of mere martyrdom, or sympathy, or example.

In this sort of hypothetical way it may be said that the facts of his history bear out the Confessional statement of the purpose of Christ's sacrifice, "to satisfy divine justice and reconcile us to God," but I would not claim that they strictly and properly prove it. But, indeed, as that statement meets the purpose in God's and in Christ's mind, it is hard to see how it could be proved by mere historical events, or otherwise than by declaration coming from Christ. Now in regard to the purpose of reconciling us to God, we have recorded statements by Jesus himself, that his blood was that of a covenant shed for many unto the remission of sins; that he came to save, and give his life a ransom for many; that he was to give his flesh for the life of the world; to give his life for his sheep, in order that they might have life. When we consider these sayings, and the fact that Jesus offered forgiveness of sins to those who believed on him, and has brought the most guilty near to God in filial confidence, may we not say that it is an historical fact that he once offered himself a sacrifice to reconcile us to God?

The clause "to satisfy divine justice" is I think the only one in the doctrinal statement that is not borne out by historical

facts, if we take into account the sayings of our Saviour, not only during his suffering but in his previous ministry. But he made no direct reference to the justice of God in this connection, although his recognition of the hand of God, and the comparison of the green tree and the dry, almost inevitably suggest the thought of it, and make Paul's statement that God set him forth as a propitiation to declare his righteousness in passing over sins and justifying the believer, a very near and obvious inference. This element of doctrine, however, must rest on apostolic authority, and no doubt the technical use of the term "satisfy" in this connection is post-apostolic; as also are the more precise definitions of justice contained in various theories of the atonement.

It cannot, therefore, be said that all the elements of the ecclesiastical, or even of the apostolic, doctrine of the atonement can be found in the facts of our Lord's sufferings; but I think the most essential of them do rest on this solid foundation of history. To these, however, the light of revelation, Christian reflection, enables us to add three great groups of thought. One includes all the positive elements of the subjective or moral-influence theories, the effect of Christ's death as a martyrdom, as an example, and as a soul-winning revelation of God's pity and love for men and hatred of sin; another comprehends those mystical views of the spiritual and vital union of Christ with the race, and of believers with Christ, that form the basis of Paul's moral teaching; and a third embraces those high considerations of the claims of God's eternal justice and universal government that have formed so large a place in protestant theology. All these groups of ideas have, I believe, elements of truth in them, though they have often been presented in one-sided and extreme forms. For an adequate presentation of the great and many-sided reality, all need to be recognized in their own place; and this may best be done on the foundation of those more essential elements that may be drawn from the historical facts. These give us an assurance that in this whole inquiry we are not occupying ourselves with mere baseless speculations, but with that great and precious reality that forms the ground of our religious faith and hope.